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# JUSTICE

in the

# JUNGLE

of New Guinea

BY MISSIONARY R. INSELMANN

*Letub" is a call for*

*Published by The Mission Auxiliary of the American Lutheran Church*

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## INFLUENCE OF CULTURE CONTACTS

SHORTLY BEFORE World War II a book on New Guinea was published under the title "The Land That Time Forgot." This island, indeed, belonged to one of the most forsaken parts of the earth, known only by a few government officials, missionaries, traders, planters, prospectors and adventurers. Being isolated from the rest of the world, it is understandable that its people remained in the stone age. Towards the end of the last century Great Britain took possession of southwest New Guinea and Germany of northeast New Guinea as colonial property. The Dutch had claimed possession of the west coast of that vast island some decades before. Since then western civilization, in increasing measure, has influenced and changed New Guinea culture. The great change worked havoc in the minds of the natives. To many it proved simply too much to grasp the full meaning of it.

You may have read various articles and reports on mission work and about the progress of our New Guinea field. Also from war reports broadcast over the radio and printed in the papers you may have learned about the loyalty of the New Guinea natives to the white man's cause: how they assisted our soldier boys, saving many from the hands of the Japanese, carrying the wounded to safety and leading stray soldiers out of the jungle.

That is one side of the story; there is another side of which, as a rule, little is said or heard. It deals with the natives' common mistrust of all whites, mission people included. This came to the fore especially during the conflict in the Pacific and in New Guinea. In our New Guinea mission field it is quite commonly known by the term *letub*. This term signifies a secret cult among the natives for the purpose of solving the secret ritual whereby the whites are thought to obtain material things. It has its origin in the contacts of western culture and New Guinea prim-

itive society, the latter being unable to adjust itself sufficiently in the course of a few decades. If only honest representatives of the white race had come to New Guinea and had lived there solely for the purpose of helping the natives in harmony with tested mission methods, the latter could and would have adjusted themselves without much trouble. But due to unscrupulous characters, many natives became confused and a false idea about the white man became fixed in their minds. It began with the earliest contacts of white men with the natives.

Many years before Great Britain took over as a colony the territory which is now known as Papua in New Guinea, and which was later made a mandate of Australia, white recruiters from Queensland contacted various islands in the South Pacific, including New Guinea. Their purpose was to contract native laborers from the various islands for the sugar cane plantations in Queensland. On account of their unscrupulous dealings with the natives they became known as the Queensland "black-birders." Later, when the government took firm possession of the various islands and of New Guinea, the activities of the "black-birders" were forbidden. All kinds of tricks were used to impress the natives with the white man's power and ability in order to lure them away from their villages. For instance, the old time recruiter would wear a costume which must have resembled somewhat that worn by the Ku Klux Klan. He would wear a high, conical-shaped hat of cardboard, a big mask, and a gay, flowing calico robe. Underneath the robe a waterproof bag was concealed. Frequently he would appear to refresh himself with a bucketful of salt water in the presence of natives. The salt water, of course, he poured into the concealed bag instead of into his mouth. He would likewise use sleight of hand and tricks of all kinds.\* Quite often natives would avenge themselves for wrongs committed by some recruiting trader.

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\*Romilly, Hugh Hastings, *The Western Pacific and New Guinea*, pp. 181, 182, 184.


At first the natives believed that the white man was either a god, a spirit or a returned ancestor. But having learned that they were men, only men of a different color, and possessing many things highly coveted by the natives, they would offer betelnuts and tobacco as a token of friendship and of peace between them. However, all too soon the natives found out that they were not considered as equals, but as inferiors by the white man. The native was taught to address the white man and to speak of him as "master." Natives were scolded and also punished for any familiarity, especially when not using the term "master."

Natives of the Nobonob congregation addressed both Missionary Ander and me by our names or using the term teacher because we taught them to do so. When a native in the presence of a Warrant Officer (a pre-war medical assistant in the Territory) spoke of Missionary Ander, omitting the term "master," he was slapped by the officer who said, "Do not dare again to speak to me of a white man, omitting the word 'master.'" Later that officer told me, "You missionaries are ruining the natives for us; they become too sophisticated and consequently will consider themselves to be on an equal status with the white man." Two Australian planters who overheard the conversation remarked, "We hope you missionaries will never be permitted to return to New Guinea after the war because you spoil the coons for us."

The objective of colonial people in general is quite different from that of the government or of the mission. The government has as its aim the development of the country and the welfare of the native; the mission has primarily the desire to bring the Gospel to the pagan which includes his welfare also. Planters, recruiters, prospectors and the large companies are in New Guinea primarily for their own interests, that is, to earn money. They are little concerned about the native except when they can use him as a means to this end. The words of a certain Dutch lady going to Java shed light upon the character of many colonial. Sometimes the honest trader was murdered instead of the villain. Even pre-war recruiting was often not without reproach.

people. She said to me, "We Dutch people, going to Java or Sumatra, leave our souls in the northern hemisphere." Of course, there are exceptions to this rule. Not all are like a certain individual who told Senior Missionary Dr. J. Flierl, "The natives are not humans, they are just blacks!"

Various factors, such as the bad influence of certain whites and Asiatics who live in the Territory, who deceive natives by their sleight of hand, ventriloquism, dishonesty, disrespect for native traditions, the manner of exploitation and recruiting, have aroused in the native mind a deep-seated suspicion and mistrust of all whites, including the missionaries. It also must be said that, in general, western culture is misunderstood by the natives, especially due to the attitude of many colonial people who do not believe in educating the native. The war added to the confusion of the natives' conception of the white man. Were it not for the Christian education offered by the various missions, perhaps all natives who had come under the influence of civilization would have turned against the white man. Missionaries have experienced that civilization without Christianity is a curse. Christian education is to be credited with the fact that the majority of natives remained loyal to the whites at the time of the invasion by the Japanese. Missionaries had gained the confidence of the majority of the people.





## THE LETUB CULT MOVEMENT

LETUB IS A WORD used by natives speaking the Nobonob language. Originally it was the name for a certain dance connected with the supernatural. Natives from Muguru village and neighboring clans knew of *letub* before the white man came to Madang. I first heard the term in 1940 when the dance involving cult rituals was revived. This soon spread to many villages. Its purpose was to make what they believed to be the secrets of the origin of wealth their own so they could obtain the many coveted trade articles and other things the white man possessed. This cult had to be bought from neighboring tribes who observed it. All of those who participated performed no work of any kind, but kept on swaying their bodies to and fro from morning until night without ceasing. They painted their bodies and put on their dance ornaments. Every night a few would stay on the cemetery grounds hoping to get into contact with the spirit ancestors. They behaved like insane people. The cult took on such dimensions that it could no longer be kept a secret. Close neighbors of the Muguru people revealed it and finally some of the *letub* people themselves confessed certain practices connected with the cult. The village of Muguru bought this peculiar behavior from their non-Protestant neighbors for a pig and a chicken. As soon as they had feasted upon the pig and the chicken with those to whom they had made the present, they began the peculiar body movements. Except for a very few natives, all the people of Muguru, including the women, were under the influence of *letub*. Other villages which had bought the cult from the Muguru people connected it with rituals and practices peculiar to their own locality and thus various forms of *letub* could be observed in the Nobonob congregation. In general, however, they were all alike inasmuch as they were connected with religious ceremonies and had as their common

objective the acquisition of wealth like that of the white man. Great mistrust of all white people soon became evident. As a direct result mission work was greatly hindered. The spiritual life of the Christian congregations, especially of those in the participating villages, was rather low.

Various similar movements dealing with material things and how to obtain them had appeared from time to time in many places throughout the Territory, also on Bougainville in the Solomon Islands.

The government finally put some of the ringleaders in jail. Thereupon the movement subsided outwardly, though inwardly it became stronger. The natives became more and more convinced that they were right. Why would the Administration punish them by putting their leaders in jail if the *letub* cult was only foolishness as the Administration claimed. Thus the movement was carried on secretly, the natives of that cult endeavoring to keep it from all whites. However, loyal natives kept on informing me.

For a few months immediately following the action taken by the government, one could see no outward signs of the movement. After a few more months some of the leaders gradually became bold again. However, they had changed their tactics somewhat. They no longer openly denounced all white people as deceivers and they no longer abstained from all work.

In New Guinea nothing is manufactured in the line of trade goods. All the things which the white people need are shipped in, including many food articles. (Missionaries raise a lot of the food used, but certain things must be imported.) A rumor spread among the natives that Jesus (or the white man's ancestors, according to others) was sending the trade articles and all the white man's goods to them. The cargo of the ships was meant for the natives as well as for the whites. However, the selfish whites were said to have crased the names of the natives for whom the goods were intended, just before the ship entered the harbor, substituting their own names for those of the natives.

Thus things which were sent to the Kamba people and to the people of other villages had been stolen from them by the whites.

Ship after ship brings to the white man what seems to be an endless supply of goods for which the native never sees the white man pay cash. But if the native likes to buy only a small article he has to pay for it or bring food in return or work for it.

In European centers of New Guinea it may happen that whites become drunk. Being intoxicated, some of them occasionally may grow angry at one another and break platters, phonograph records and other things. The next day the native house boy may be sent to the store to buy new platters and phonograph records to replace the broken ones. All the "master" seems to give in return is a letter for which he can buy things. The customs of the white man are simply beyond the conception of the uneducated native.

Missionaries repeatedly have tried to explain to natives how these things are manufactured and have also shown movies to them. It has been mentioned before that some whites deceive natives with sleight of hand. Apparently they produce coins and other articles from nowhere. Because of this some natives think that these things are actually produced by magic. He can buy things with money, but in order to get the money he must work for the white man. The white man, on the other hand, apparently does not have to work in order to get the money, but simply performs the magic which gives him the necessary money.

Besides material things the native desires more participation in native administration. A certain patrol officer was asked by the natives to interpret to them a certain story. They said, "Long ago a father had two sons. To one he gave a ship like the white people possess. To the other he gave a canoe like we have." According to information received from natives, the patrol officer answered, "The dove flies upward finding her food on various trees, but the duck's habit is to stick its head into the mud." The natives understood the interpretation only too well; namely, the white man considers himself to be the dove and the

native to be the duck which does not look upwards and around in the world and consequently remains in a lower state. The natives concluded from this that they were looked down upon by the white man, being deemed too ignorant to adopt a higher culture.

The natives were not granted more participation in native administration. All their hopes were shattered as over night and mistrust against the white man increased. World War II had just commenced in Europe. The Administration at once forbade all whites and Asiatics living in the Territory to inform the natives about war activities. This added fuel to the already strong mistrust of all whites and the fruit of it came to the fore especially at the time of the invasion by the Japanese.

It was a common thing for the non-Protestant mission in New Guinea to gain the favor of a village by giving presents like axes, loin cloths, matches, knives, beads and other desired things to the natives. Thus the people got the idea that the wealth of the whites was unlimited. After they have once joined the non-Protestant mission no more presents are given, but they are told to buy these things or to give things in exchange for them. The mission, of course, cannot afford to give things away continually. The result is that the natives become disappointed. Time and again non-Protestant missionaries used the method of "buying" natives with goods, persuading them to leave the Protestant mission and come to them.

A sectarian missionary tried to persuade Christian natives near Madang to join his mission by promising them wonderful things if they would forsake the Lutheran mission. Some of the natives were under the impression that if all the people would leave the Lutheran mission and join the mission of this sect, something like a millenium would take place.

At a native conference *letub* people said, "What the mission has given us is good. We like the Word of God. But they have given us only one part, merely the shell. The kernel they keep for themselves." They talked of a certain cave near Alexishafen where their ancestors were busy building ships like those of the

the white man. They claimed they could hear them using hammers, nails and saws. They thought that after all villages had joined in the movement and observed the ceremonies connected therewith, they would receive the things of the white man. Ships would bring the goods to them.

Shortly before the attack on Pearl Harbor, the District Officer of Madang promised the natives protection in case of an enemy invasion. However, after the first bombardment of Madang by the Japanese, all of the Civil Administration left in haste, including the very official who had promised protection to the people and who had told them not to be afraid. What confusion and bewilderment this action must have caused in the minds of the natives!

The missionaries were the only representatives of the white race who remained calm while at their posts.

In 1942 many villages openly condemned the *letub* movement. Congregational discipline was strongly exercised and more evangelistic work was done in 1942 than in any other single year.

When the Japanese invaded Madang the *letub* people had great expectations. A native government official, himself a *letub* man, called all natives within his reach to a conference at his village. Many villages were not represented. He told them that the highest Japanese official at Madang had come to his village to ask who was king in that region. Naturally, that native official claimed to be the king and the Japanese officer gave him one of the boats stolen at Madang. The officer is supposed to have said, "The first foreigners who came to you and occupied your country were the Germans. They did not help you materially as you had expected them to do; therefore, they gained your disfavor. Then the English came. You put great hope in them for a while, but soon you learned that they were no better than the Germans. Since you were dissatisfied also with them, you began calling for us. Now we have come. We are not foreigners, but people like

you and your friends. You shall get all the things you desire which the whites have been deliberately withholding from you."

What the Japanese officer is supposed to have said is merely that native official's own construction and interpretation colored by wishful thinking. The natives did not speak English and most likely the Japanese officer did not speak Pidgin English at the time. From then on the *letub* people hailed the Japanese as their ancestors and the native official encouraged them to raise a native army to assist the Japanese in driving the whites out of New Guinea. Among other things he told the deluded people not to sorrow over the missionaries who had been interned by the Japanese, because they justly deserved their punishment.

Some natives, strongly influenced by *letub*, helped Japanese soldiers raid mission property on Nobonob station, but the people of Nobonob set a fine example. The Japanese compelled them to bring the cattle from the Amron Central School mission station to the Nagada plantation. An officer offered them one of the heifers as payment for their work. The chief, Ipauk, refused, saying, "This is not our property; we are Christians and do not steal."

In the Nobonob congregation approximately one-third of all the villages were under the influence of *letub*. Various villages outside of that congregation's territory also belonged to the cult.

Due to the loyalty of many natives I did not fall into Japanese hands. Two months after the occupation of Madang by the Japanese, evangelists told me with deep emotion, "You must leave us now and go to your people, the Americans. We do not want the same thing to happen to you that has happened to Ander and to other missionaries. We shall carry on with the work which Christ has given us and will wait for your return when the war is over." Word also reached me from an Australian patrol through native messengers that I should come to them without delay. Loyal natives escorted me safely for 180 miles, on foot, of course. At times we were dangerously near Japanese patrols until we reached the first Australian outpost patrol. The



natives knew they were risking their lives by helping me escape. From there on I traveled another 120 miles on foot until I reached Bena Bena in the far inland of New Guinea. A transport plane took me from there to Port Moresby.

Soon after the Japanese had landed at Madang they began to draft all available native manpower for labor. They had to clear the jungles and plant food for the Japanese. They had to build bridges, roads and airports. Japanese soldiers did not hesitate to shoot the best pigs in a village through which they passed. There was no thought of offering something in return for them. On account of this most villages began to kill their larger hogs and eat them before the Japanese could steal them.

Natives had many reasons to be very much alarmed. A Japanese official commanded them to place all unmarried women and widows in every village into a women's house. To keep the Japanese from misusing young native girls, some barely of marriageable age, they gave them in marriage to young boys in the village.

Whenever American planes and bombers appeared over Madang loyal natives hailed them as their deliverers from the hand of the enemy and patiently waited for our troops to come to Madang to drive the enemy out of their country.



## OUR FUTURE TASK

I HAD TO LEAVE two months after the Japanese occupied Madang. If I could have stayed a little longer I am convinced that I would have seen most of the *letub* people return to us as penitent sinners, realizing that the missionaries, after all, had told them the truth and that the Japanese were not their ancestors. In January 1945 thirteen letters from natives in the vicinity of Madang were sent to us missionaries on forced furlough. Several letters indicated how sorry the *letub* people felt over their conduct. They had changed their idea about the Japanese; the Japanese had deliberately beheaded some natives.

Are we to condemn the *letub* people for their mistrust of the whites and for their actions? Every lover of the truth, I think, must answer with an emphatic "No!" Had many whites shown a little more love instead of lust, a little more good will instead of greed, had the natives been treated with more respect, had they been considered not beneath the level of human beings, had they been properly educated instead of being willfully kept in ignorance, had they been treated more as equals, the Australian Administration would have won them as their truest friends. The white man had been sowing the seed for the *letub* cult ever since his earliest contact with the natives.

It will not be easy to bring about a change because there have been too many years in which injustice has been meted out to these people of a lower culture. However, a change can be made if all the former evils are not allowed to take root again in the post-war era. The country must be opened up again not with the idea of showing the natives that we think ourselves superior to them; we must be sympathetic, patient and willing to give guidance. The Administration of New Guinea must consider it a sacred obligation to guarantee the natives the things that belong to their highest welfare. Our Mission, in addition to



its primary task of bringing the Gospel, must interest itself in giving the natives the chance to learn various handicrafts so they will be able to supply many of their needs without being dependent upon the white man for the ordinary things used in every native home.

We have been engaged in New Guinea mission work since the close of World War I. We often lacked men and means to do our work, but by the grace of God and in the spirit of love we hope, in the post-war era, to help our faithful Christian natives win New Guinea for Christ.

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